

Saying it all with dance: The art of Margie Gillis

The dances of legendary Margie Gillis embody emotions, transformations, and deeply buried evolutionary memories that are too complex to be expressed in words.

Alone on the vast stage of the Port Theatre last Saturday night, she mesmerized her audience, in still another highlight from this year's InFrinGinG Dance Festival.

No matter how minimal or sweeping the gesture, she was always in complete control.

No matter how much or how little one comprehended her choreographed communications, one felt the exultation and the pain, the love and the loss.

Her program, with the ambiguous title of *FLUID STABILITY*, consisted of six dances, composed like poetry. Each one, as described in the program, "a condensed distillation of a concept or state of being/experience."

In many she expresses a profound connection to the natural world, organic and inorganic, birds and stone. And to the secrets they may reveal.

In the opening number 'Breathing in Bird Bone', the backdrop is a vast sweep of clouds, the music is oceanic, and the dancer in white expresses such an expansive sense of joy that she transforms into a bird.

With arms outstretched, running, laughing, the bird rides the winds gracefully, but walks awkwardly on land. Through delicate observation the dancer captures the movements and idiosyncrasies of birds, ending on a sad note with the darkening sky and the realization of being land-bound.

The avian reference turns up again in 'Broken Stone', which was inspired by the environment of a stone quarry in Norway.

It opens with the dancer, now in black against a black backdrop with her long hair flying, trying desperately to shut out or escape the song of birds — perhaps because they remind her in some primordial way of loss, her inability to fly.

Her dance patterns adapt to blend with the strange sound of ancient instruments that have been recovered from a Bronze Age archaeological site in Scotland.

To the music of a 2,000-year-old horn (which sounds like a didgeridoo), she swirls in circles, but to the percussive drum beat of sticks and stones, her movements become more angular, alternately ritualistic and



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frenzied. The whole dance suggests ancient memories buried in our bones.

'When Skin Separates From Bone' is the darkest and most minimal number in her program — with its references to the inorganic world of stone and death. The huge stage is completely black.

Only the figure of the dancer is visible as she moves and rotates almost imperceptibly from the left side to the right.

Her shoulders and back are bare, gleaming in the single spotlight, while the lower portion of her body is encased in a lumpy, bulky, black garment that looks like an immobile chunk of stone — like living tissue being slowly swallowed up in sedimentary matter.

By contrast, in 'The Complex Simplicity of Love', the dancer becomes a poem in motion, giving herself over completely to the dance with her full skirt twirling and her loose hair flowing and her breathing heavy — even to the point of frenzy. But the joy is tinged with complexity.

Her colors are dark, and the beautiful countertenor aria from Handel's *Rinaldo* on the soundtrack is a sad lament.

Breaking away from the austere dark tones of her program, her final number 'What the Wind Whispers' features a gorgeous red gown and a streaky background of red and blue — suggesting veins, arteries and the human heart.

To the serene music of Brahms sung by Jessye Norman, the dancer evokes the recurring miracle of the spirit's resilience, how one can be crumpled down with absolute grief but rise again awaiting new challenges.

We were in the presence of a genuine, one-of-a-kind artist Saturday night.

Margie Gillis has made and continues to make a distinctive contribution to the art of dance, the culture of Canada and the world.

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